

Laura K. K. K.

Driver 3A

Personal file

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The Assassination of Abraham Lincoln

Laura Keene

Excerpts from newspapers and other
sources

From the files of the
Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection

Laura Keene

Drawer 12A

Personal files

LAURA KEENE.

The Forgotten Actress Who Played When Lincoln Was Shot.

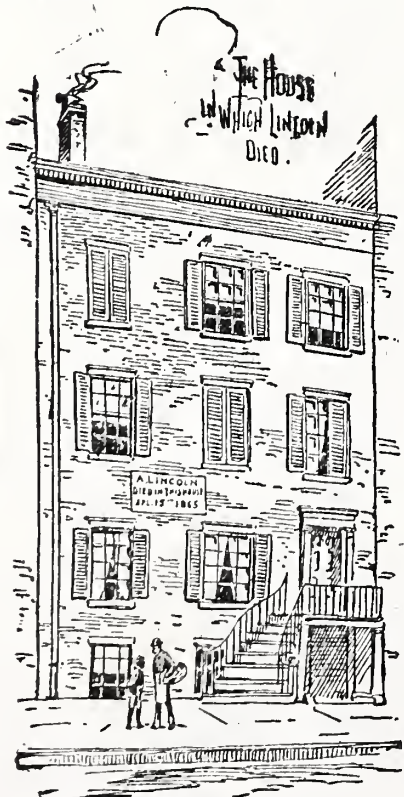
Laura Keene, the actress, who played the role of heroine in "The American Cousin" in Ford's theatre the night Lincoln was assassinated is now an almost forgotten celebrity. Her appearance on that tragic occasion gives her an interest in the minds of the American people that her histrionic talents, though they were of no mean order, never could.

She it was of all in the theatre who reached Lincoln's side first after the shot was fired. On her way across the stage she saw and recognized Wilkes Booth.



Miss Keene was English. Born in 1830, she began her dramatic career when quite young, and gained considerable celebrity at the Lyceum theatre, London. While playing Pauline in "The Lady of Lyons," at the Olympic in London, in 1851, the senior Wallack saw her and engaged her for his theatre on Broadway near Broome street, New York. She appeared there in 1852. Her mother and two children accompanied her to this country. Her maiden name is said to have been Lee, her husband's name Taylor.

When she left Wallack's she went traveling. In November, 1855, she returned to New York and opened the Metropolitan theatre, afterward the "Winter Garden." John Trimble built her a new theatre, which was opened in 1856 with "As You Like It." Previous to this she made a starring tour, visiting most of the principal cities with success. She produced "The American Cousin" for the first time in America at her theatre in October, 1858. It ran to crowded houses until March, 1859. She produced "The Seven Sisters" in 1860, and it enjoyed a run of 160 nights. Three years after the assassination of Lincoln she returned to England, but came back to America after a brief absence. Later she again went to England and there died six or seven years ago.



WEIR

SAYS ACTRESS POSED AT LINCOLN TRAGEDY

Capt. Owens Saw Laura Keene
Strike an Attitude and
Cry Booth's Name.

AUDIENCE RIGGED NOOSES

Lowered Ropes from the Fly Galleries
of Ford's Theatre—He Also
Saw Booth Buried.

Capt. Silas Owens, who has settled down as a factory inspector at Cohoes after eight years of sea adventures, told yesterday some further details of the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. He was in Ford's Theatre on the night of the assassination with William H. Flood, the first man to reach the President's box after the shot had been fired, whose reminiscences have been published in THE TIMES.

"People talk a lot about what Booth called from the stage," said Capt. Owens yesterday. "He didn't say a word as he ran across the boards. He was too busy cursing his luck in hurting his leg, I reckon. What he did do was to stand for a moment on the red plush front of the box and call out something. It may have been 'Sic semper tyrannis,' but though I was so near I was too excited to make out the words.

"There wasn't a soul on the stage at the time. The curtain was just rising, and Laura Keene was waiting in the right wings to go on. Harry Hawk used to claim that Booth brushed him aside, but if there had been any one on the stage he could never have made his escape that way.

"As Miss Keene saw him she recognized him at once and cried out: 'My God, John, what have you done?' He slashed at her with his dagger, and I could hear the sleeve of the lilac dress she was wearing tear. There was some blood found on it afterward, and it has been exhibited since as stained with the blood of the President. But how could that be? Booth hadn't been near enough to the President to get blood-stained. If there's any blood the dagger scratched her arm and that caused the stains.

"I remember that a moment or two after Booth had escaped Miss Keene came running out and struck a theatrical attitude on the right side of the stage. There was an awful clamor going on as soon as the audience realized what Mrs. Lincoln had meant by calling from the box, 'He's killed papa!'

"Miss Keene called out in the most dramatic fashion, 'It's John Wilkes Booth. Kill him!'

"The audience took up the shout, and somehow or other they got hold of the rope from the flies and in a few minutes a dozen were suspended from the galleries with nooses at the end.

"People kept shouting 'Where is he? Hang him! Bring him out!' If Booth had not got clear off he would have been hanged there and then for certain."

Capt. Owens smiles as he speaks of the ordinary pictures of the death of Lincoln surrounded by a crowd of Cabinet offi-

cers and doctors. He asks how so many men could possibly have got into the little room to which he was carried. It was only a hall bedroom eight feet square and could not have held them all.

Capt. Owens is one of the seven men, he says, who were admitted into the secret at the time of the disposition of Booth's body. Only President Johnson, Secretary of War Stanton, two naval and two military officers knew where it was buried, and they were sworn to secrecy. One rumor was that it was taken to sea and thrown overboard, another that it was cast into the whirlpool where the currents of the River Potomac and its eastern branch meet. It is held to be bottomless, and if anything is dropped into it it is never recovered.

However, the pledge of silence has been long since removed and Capt. Owens said: "Booth was brought up to the navy yard and placed on the Montauk, the very vessel which, as Flood said, was visited by Lincoln a few hours before he was shot. There it lay on deck for sixteen hours covered only with an old tarpaulin. At midnight it was removed to a cell in the old arsenal just underneath the court where Justice Blugham was sitting in the trial of the conspirators.

"A flagstone was raised, a hole was dug, and the body roughly cased in an old gun box was lowered into it. Then the flagstone was replaced and no one knew what had been done. The body remained there from April 20, 1865, till 1872, when Booth's relatives claimed it and it was removed. Where they finally buried it has never been divulged."

Before the civil war Capt. Owens served as an apprentice in the United States Navy. He was at Calcutta during the sepoy mutiny of 1857. He went with the first American Minister, Townsend Harris, to Japan. Americans were then far from welcome, and the Minister's secretary was killed three weeks after he landed. Americans were expressly forbidden to enter the towns and were searched before they landed at the dock to see that they were unarmed.

When they returned home they took with them a few Japanese lads to receive an American education. Among those whom Capt. Owens used to see running about the deck was Togo, the famous Admiral.

Capt. Owens was also present at the first and last engagement American ships ever fought with Chinese. It was in 1859 at the Barrier Forts below Canton. A boat's crew had been sent up the river to Canton to protect the American residents who were in fear of their lives in consequence of the military operations the French and British were carrying on with the Chinese. The American Commodore decided after a time to bring this little force away and sent another boat's crew to fetch them.

The boat had to pass through the barrier, which consisted of half a dozen rows of piles driven across the river below Canton, where it could be commanded by a series of forts. Only a narrow passage was left through it, which was known only to the Chinese pilots. As the Americans were feeling their way through, the forts opened fire and killed the leadman.

The American Commodore decided that he must take action and proceeded to reduce the forts. They were manned by 10,000 Chinese, and there were only 600 Americans, but as Capt. Owens said:

"They couldn't stand against us at all. As soon as we got within musket fire they would run away. In three weeks we had dismantled all the forts, and then the Governor of Canton came down and offered an official apology.

"For a few years I seemed to be right in the centre of things where history was making, and I could have stayed in the service when the war was over. But I was married in November, 1865, and I found the two services didn't agree. So I resigned from the navy."

Cincinnati Enquirer
2-12-35
Your America--- DAY-by-DAY
By Clark Kinnaird.

PRESIDENT LINCOLN was criticized for seeking diversion during crucial times in Washington. He responded, "Some think I do wrong to go to the opera and the theater, but it rests me. I love to be alone and yet be with other people. I want to get this burden off; to change the current of my thoughts. A hearty laugh relieves me and I seem better able after it to bear my cross." And so on April 14, 1865, he was at the theater to be diverted by Laura Keene, the country's first actress-manager, in a popular comedy success, *Our American Cousin*. Some 80 threats had been made against his life, but Lincoln was philosophical and unafraid about exposing himself to an assassin in such a public place. He said something else then that is worthy of remembrance in our day: "If I am killed, I can die but once; but to live in constant dread of it is to die over and over again."

FORD'S THEATRE
Tenth Street, Washington, D. C.
Friday Even'g, April 14, 1865
THIS EVENING
The performance will be honored by the presence of
PRESIDENT LINCOLN.
BENEFIT AND LAST NIGHT
OF MISS
LAURA KEENE
The Distinguished Manageress, Authoress, and Actress, supported by
MR. JOHN DYOTT, and
MR. HARRY HAWK.
Tom Taylor's Celebrated Locomotive Comedy as originally produced in America by Miss Keene, and performed by her upwards of
ONE THOUSAND NIGHTS
entitled
Our American Cousin.
Florence Tranchart, Miss Laura Keene
Ann McCreary, Miss Dyott
Sam. Thompson, Mr. Hawk
Mr. Edward Tranchart, T. C. Gentry
J. A. Keene

[1] Laura Keene, star of the show on Lincoln's fatal night. Above: One of various counterfelt handbills of the last performance. A real one does not have the name of the city.



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STAINED BY LINCOLN'S BLOOD.

Valuable Piece of Silk in a San Francisco Woman's Possession.

Mrs. Joseph W. De Lano, of this city, is the possessor of a valuable piece of moire silk, says the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Its value does not depend upon its size or the fact that it is flowered white moire, but upon three or four dark stains which it bears.

Miss Laura Keene once wore a dress out of which this piece of silk was cut. She was playing at Ford's theater the part of Florence Trenchard in "Our American Cousin" on the night of April 14, 1865. The great scene between Asa Trenchard, played by Harry Hawkes, and Florence was just over, when a shot rang through the house, and almost immediately afterward a man was seen to leap from the box occupied by Abraham Lincoln, Mrs. Lincoln and two friends. In the confusion which immediately followed the assassination Miss Keene ran round the stage and up to the box, wearing the dress she had on as Florence. Just prior to the removal of President Lincoln his head rested a moment on Miss Keene's lap, and it was then that the blood fell on the dress.

Miss Keene cut the stained portions out of the dress, and on April 17, three days after the shooting and two days after Lincoln died, gave Mrs. De Lano the piece she now has.

W. G. GILGER
NORWALK, OHIO

Feb. 12th '35

Laura Keene

My Dear Walter:

Answering your letter just received.

The questions therein contained carry me back to my youth and the happenings of that time, before the "gay Nineties".

I landed in Franklin Pa. from my home in Chillicothe in 1880. and was in the employ of a Mr. Lehmann and shared an apartment with him, he being a bachelor, the apartment was in a residence near the business district.

While there I learned that J. Wilkes Booth had lived in that house a short time before Lincoln was shot, how long he lived there I did not learn, but

he evidently was on his way to Washington.

The unbelievable signal to Booths advent into Franklins was, the appearance of Laura Keane's wardrobe, the costume she wore in the comedy "Country Cousins" in which she appeared at Fords Theatre the night Lincoln was shot.

Several trunks with Laura Keane's name printed on them, were in the attic of this house, and I have frequently witnessed the opening of them and display of their contents to many people, some of whom had come quite a distance to see them.

As I recall, they were of the richest fabrics and most of them were monogrammed.

The house is still standing and is used as a dwelling, and business.

W. G. GILGER
NORWALK, OHIO

Mr James Boardman Editor and
prop. of "the Franklin News" could
no doubt, give you a more
authentic account of the
information you desire. Hope
however, what I have been
able to remember will help
you.

Am wondering how well
remembered that bit of gossip
from among the many things
we talked over?

Glad to know everyone out-
your way are well and getting
along.

We are all well at this
end of the line.

Sarah joins in love to
"you all." Will.

7/15/91
May 15, 1991

Dear Ms. Tolbert,

Thank you for sending me the letters and clippings from your files regarding Laura Keene's dress.

The reason of my previous request of information on Laura Keene's dress is that I am researching a 75 year old friend of mine's old black taffeta silk shawl with bloodstains on it. Supposedly this shawl was wrapped around Abraham Lincoln on the night of the assassination.

I have been doing genealogical and historical research. I am trying to make a connection of the shawl and my friend's family. I would also like to know who it belonged to.

Walter Reed Medical Museum in Washington, D.C., had blood samples of Abraham Lincoln. I have sent photographs of the shawl to them and inquired if they could lab test the stains on my friend's shawl and match them to Abraham Lincoln's blood. The reply was a very interested yes. They will be getting in contact again as to inform us of the procedure on mailing the shawl to them.

Enclosed is photographs taken of the shawl. Do the flower patterns match the swatch of of dress that you have on display? Do you know if she had a shawl that accompanied the dress?

I would also like to know more about the letter you copied of W.G. Gilger in Norwalk, Ohio for me. Who was he responding to? Was it someone from the museum?

I would appreciate any information or advice you may have.

I am looking forward to your reply.

Sincerely,
J. Diane Schambre
22722 Edgewater
St. Clair Shores, Michigan 48082
(313) 293-4835



Thursday, March 23,



History lovers hear more about 'the dress'

By LEIGH PROTIVNAK

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Margo Mong addresses an audience at the Barrow Little Theatre on John Wilkes Booth and Laura Keene.

The Historic Franklin Preservation Association and other history lovers filled the Barrow Little Theatre on Thursday night to learn of the oil region's connections to the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln.

"John Wilkes Booth Actor, Oilman, Assassin and Miss Laura Kéene in the Pennsylvania Oil Region" was presented to a packed house by frequent lecturer and oil historian Margo Mong of Oil City.

Mong began her presentation with a detailed description of Lincoln's fateful trip to Ford's Theatre, including the blood smeared on Keene's face "where her fingers strayed," and the placement of Lincoln "diagonally on a too-short, four poster bed" after he had been shot.

Keene was on stage that night, April 14, 1865, performing "Our American Cousin" while Booth shot the president in the back of the head with a Derringer.

Known for her grand wardrobe and levelheaded stage portrayals, Keene was in her acting prime in the mid-1860s.

While on stage, Keene tried to quell the uproar after the shot was fired. Then she went to the state box where Lincoln's party was seated and cradled his head in her lap.

Originally, it was thought the president was shot in the chest, but the bloodstains on Keene's dress proved the wound was to Lincoln's head.

Keene in the oil region

Although Keene was reportedly so traumatized by the assassination she wouldn't let anyone speak of it in front of her, she used her Lincoln dress to gain publicity for her tours. Her last tour took place in the oil region in the summer of 1873. Her final performance was in Tidioute.

Though Keene's reputation was floundering, the oil region was booming. Mong said a festival was held in conjunction with the Tidioute performance that boasted three horse races with purses of more than \$500,000 each.

"Oil money," she said with a smirk.

Newspapers throughout the region gave the actress's blood-soaked accouterments better review than they gave Keene. Among the unfavorable write-ups, a reviewer from the Daily Derrick called her "miserable," Mong said.

According to Mong, Keene was stricken with consumption — an incurable disease that attacks the lungs — in the mid-1860s, but never told her audiences.

In desperate need of money, Keene reportedly sold off many of her dresses while in the Oil Region.

An audience member, Bill Bowen, shared a family antidote with the group. One of Bowen's ancestors had the opportunity to purchase the famous dress, but decided against it saying, "It was so blood soaked you couldn't possibly wear it."

Mong said the few existing scraps of the dress are worth nearly \$300,000 each today.

Swatches of fabric from Keene's dress can be seen at the Illinois State Historical Society and the Abraham Lincoln Book Shop in Chicago.

Booth in the oil region

Before the assassination, Booth spent a possible total of 48 days during several trips to Franklin trying his hand in the oil industry.

"Everything is oil and smokes," Booth wrote to a friend to describe why he loved the town.

Booth and two friends formed the Dramatic Oil Company on 3.5 acres in Franklin, but on his third visit, Booth disposed of all of his assets here in order to focus on acting. He made no money here, Mong said.

After the assassination, Booth's friends from Franklin gathered to discuss Booth's possible return to the oil region and what they would do if it happened.

Those who knew him here couldn't recall Booth ever saying anything negative about the president and chalked his actions up to insanity, Mong said, not because they knew him to be crazy, but because the "desperado" act of killing the president was so unlike anything he ever did in Franklin.

He was said to be a moderate drinker, with the ability to hold his liquor, but one occasion was documented where a very drunk Booth took to the street in front of the courthouse and did a rousing rendition of "Richard III." The performance was so good, however, that no charges were filed, Mong said.

"It's amazing what's housed here," Mong said, and encouraged everyone to visit Drake Well Museum or the Venango County Courthouse for traces of Booth left behind.

The HFPA will meet again at 7 p.m. Friday, April 28, for a tour of Courtroom 1 led by county Commissioner Gary Hutchison.

Mong's next presentation "Kathryn Kuhlman: Walking the Sawdust Trail" will be held April 6, at Drake Well Museum.

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